

Planning New York City c.1811

The city of New York is a rich tapestry of interwoven streets, parks, rivers, industry, and infrastructure. In 1811, a commission was convened by the state Legislature to regulate and plan for orderly development in New York City below 155th Street. This plan put in place the rectangular grid of streets and lots that is iconic of New York City today. This map is one of the few known originals in existence and has been called the single most important document in New York City's development.

The New York Grid

The Commissioners Plan of 1811 laid the foundation for the expansion of New York City during the 19th century. As the population grew, New York City needed an orderly way to expand infrastructure, housing, and transportation. The state Legislature gave the commission the “exclusive power to lay out streets, roads, and public squares, of such width, extent, and direction, as to them shall seem most conducive to public good...” The commission had authority to lay out streets and alter existing roads on all of Manhattan above Houston Street.

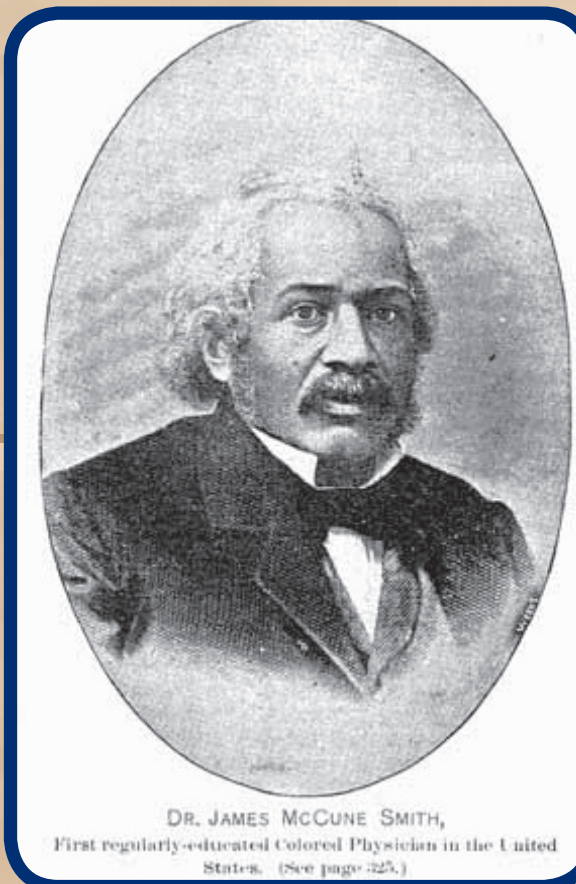


John Randel, Jr. - Surveyor

Randel was Simeon DeWitt's apprentice and his work surveying Manhattan Island allowed for the implementation of the city's rectilinear grid across uneven terrain, marshes, streams, and existing man-made structures. Randel surveyed the entire island, over 11,000 acres, which took nearly two years from 1808 to 1810. His work was meticulous and accurate partially due to his invention of several surveying instruments of great precision. In the years after the Plan of 1811, Randel worked to implement the city grid by erecting nearly 1,600 survey markers: one at the intersection of each street.

Dr. James McCune Smith

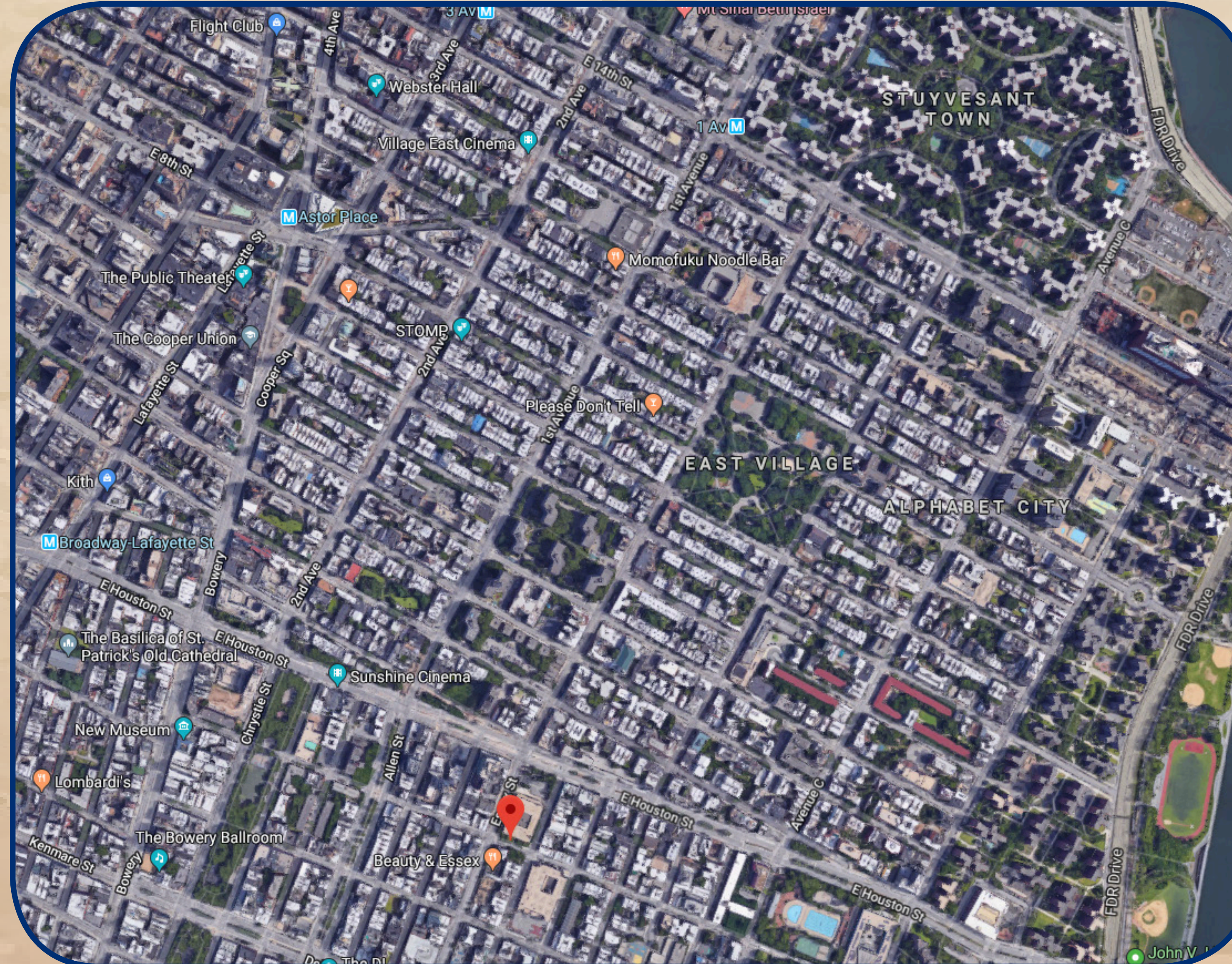
James McCune Smith was the first African American to hold a medical degree and the first to run a pharmacy in the U.S. His pharmacy was located at 93 West Broadway and served as a safe haven for escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad.



Approximate location of Smith's Pharmacy. Chambers St. and Chapel St., later renamed West Broadway.

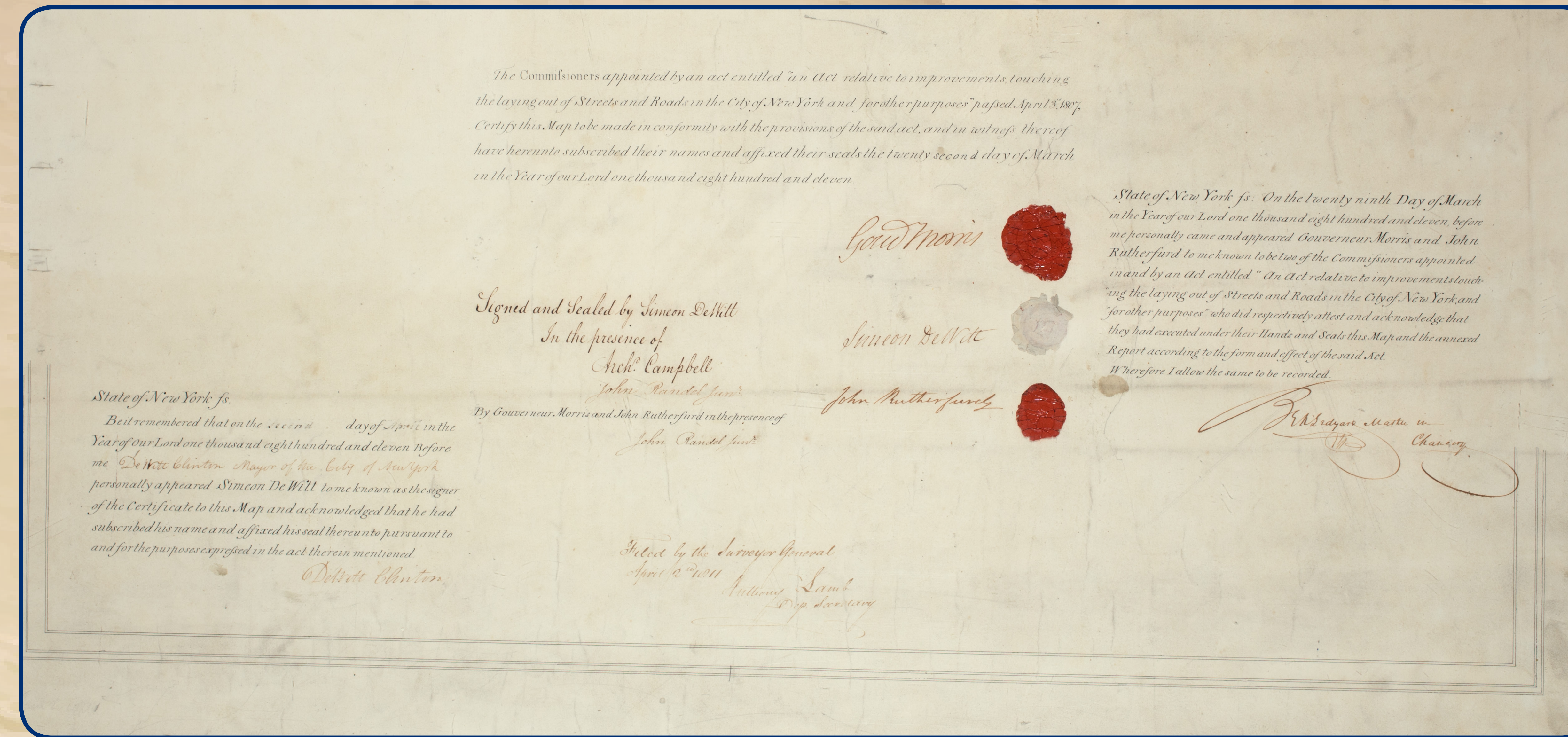


This section of NYC shows the difference between the planned grid blocks and the older narrow grids.

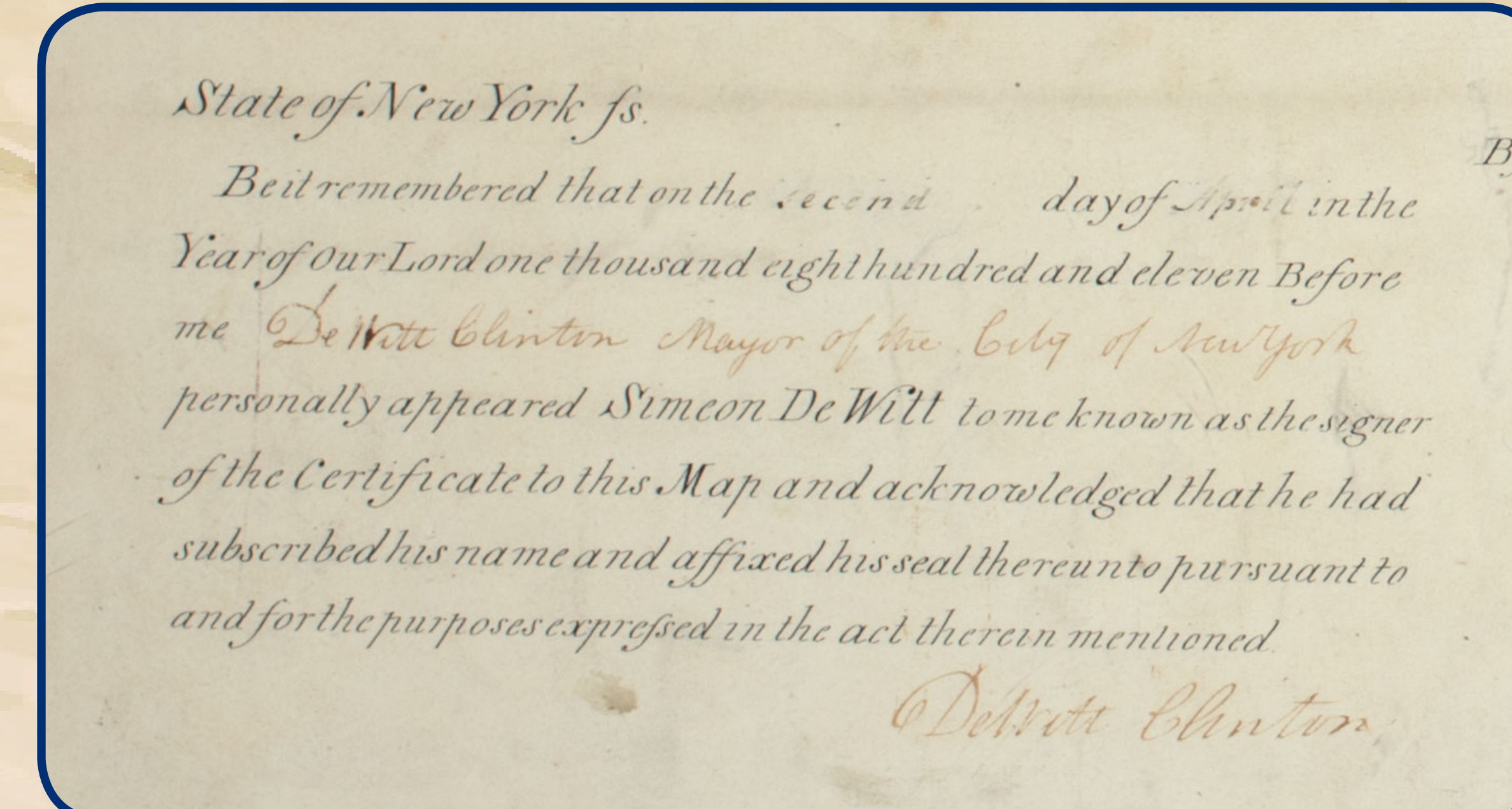


The same location today, the East Village, where the meeting of two distinct types of street grids is still evident.

The Commissioners Plan



DeWitt Clinton - Mayor



Clinton was Mayor of New York City in three non-consecutive terms from 1803 to 1815. As mayor, he appointed the commission to determine a plan for the development of New York City north of 14th Street.

Gouverneur Morris

Morris is one of the least-known founding fathers, but is generally considered one of the most influential in the writing of the Constitution. Morris wrote the Preamble to the Constitution and was also the chairman of the Erie Canal Commission.

Simeon DeWitt

DeWitt was the surveyor general of the state of New York for 50 years from 1784 until his death in 1834. Prior to that, he was a cartographer and surveyor general for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

John Rutherfurd

Rutherfurd was a land surveyor, lawyer, and senator from New Jersey (1791-98). He assisted with determining the boundaries between New York and New Jersey.

